DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 388 355 JC 950 540

AUTHOR Katz, Helen McKay; Astroth, Jonathan M.
TITLE From Candidacy to Accreditation: A Campus-Wide Commitment.
PUB DATE 95
NOTE 8p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the North Central Association (100th, Chicago, IL, March 26-29, 1995).
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Accreditation (Institutions); *College Planning; Community Colleges; Educational Administration; Institutional Advancement; *Organizational Climate; *Organizational Development; *Organizational Objectives; Participative Decision Making; *Self Evaluation (Groups); Two Year Colleges
IDENTIFIERS *Heartland Community College IL

ABSTRACT

In 1992, Heartland Community College (HCC), in Illinois, was granted candidacy status for accreditation by the North Central Association (NCA). In 1994, the college decided to seek full accreditation to ensure its place in the local community, ensure federal funding, and to show that it had grown since candidacy and was ready to fulfill accreditation criteria. Three factors suggested that the HCC was in a favorable position to achieve accreditation: the college had employed highly experienced faculty and staff; it had a capable employee to direct the self-study process; and there was a strong commitment to the accreditation process by the board of trustees, executive management, and all employees. A climate of cooperation and commitment to the process was created throughout the college through visits from NCA personnel, the inclusion a cross-section of employees on committees, and meetings and updates. The climate was also fostered by HCC's organizational values, including the college's emphasis on a positive attitude; the importance of a collective contribution to the process; the focus on employee integrity, related specifically to preparing staff for the site team visit; and the institutional view of the site visit as an opportunity to offer valuable suggestions and promote positive development. Preparation for the site visit included disseminating information throughout the campus, lunch meetings, and close contact with the site team chair. In August 1994, HCC was granted accreditation. (TGI)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED 388 355

From Candidacy to Accreditation: A Campus-Wide Commitment

Helen McKay Katz
Jonathan M. Astroth

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☒ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
H. Katz
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)"

Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the North Central Association
(100th, Chicago, IL, March 26-29, 1995)

JC 950 540

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

FROM CANDIDACY TO ACCREDITATION: A CAMPUS-WIDE COMMITMENT

Helen McKay Katz
Jonathan Astroth

Heartland Community College (HCC) is the newest and fastest growing community college in the state of Illinois. Established in 1990, the College first offered classes in fall 1991 with an initial enrollment of 811 students. In 1992, Heartland applied for and was granted candidacy status with the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools. With a site visit scheduled for 1994, the College made the momentous decision not to apply for renewed candidacy, but to apply for initial accreditation. By this time, Heartland had experienced rapid growth in enrollment (2453 in spring, 1994), and a dramatic increase in full time faculty and staff. However, in spite of this growth, it was recognized that because Heartland was such a young institution, the responsibility rested with the College to prove that it had matured and advanced to such an extent that it was worthy of accreditation.

Various factors contributed to the College's decision to seek full accreditation. First, the circumstances of Heartland's creation placed a premium on HCC attaining accreditation. From a local point of view, the College was created by State mandate over the wishes of voters who had thrice, via referenda, defeated formation of this community college district. One of the principal reasons contributing to the defeat of the formation of the college in referenda was the popular belief that the college was not needed because two universities already existed within the proposed service area of the community college. Thus, ignorance of the role of a community college engendered skepticism over the legitimacy of such an institution, placing a greater than normal value on the status of accreditation, especially since

long-standing, well-regarded local universities were accredited.

Next, as a candidate institution the College had experienced a near crisis with respect to federal financial aid. In the process of the federal reauthorization of the Higher Education Act during 1993, candidate institutions were originally eliminated from eligibility to participate in federal financial aid programs. Had HCC been eliminated, it would have been a severe blow to the early development of the institution. Although candidate institutions were ultimately restored to eligibility, HCC became apprehensive about the continued ability of candidate institutions to receive federal financial aid.

Finally, and most importantly, the College viewed itself as ready to seek initial accreditation. College leadership made a judgment regarding three important points. First, they believed that since HCC had developed sufficiently overall since the time of candidacy that seeking initial accreditation was appropriate. Second, in reviewing the report of the site visit team that recommended candidacy, leadership felt that the College had addressed the specific recommendations of that report. Third, because HCC is a member of a statewide system of public community colleges, leadership believed some general issues distinguishing candidacy from accreditation, such as permanency and long-range capabilities of the institution, could be adequately addressed.

In spite of these circumstances, College staff realized that proving Heartland satisfied all of the requirements for accreditation was going to be a major accomplishment. Three factors however, specifically suggested to College leadership that the institution was in a favorable position to achieve accreditation.

First, the College had employed highly experienced people in several key positions --

faculty, administrative, and clerical. The collective experience of these employees significantly accelerated the development of a high quality institution. Coupled with experienced employees in key positions, HCC found that as a new institution it attracted people with a pioneering outlook and a willingness to commit enormous energy to the College, further supporting its rapid development.

Second, the College believed it had a capable employee among its leadership to direct the self-study process. There was complete confidence on the part of executive management that the person recruited to serve in this capacity would cause the project to be completed within the timeframe available and to the highest standards of quality. The fact that the coordinator had also directed Heartland's first self-study for candidacy served as an advantage and provided a much needed degree of experience in organizing the steering committee and self-study groups.

Finally, there was a strong commitment to the accreditation process by the board of trustees, executive management, and all employees as there had been to the rapid development of the College. Gaining initial accreditation was an institutional priority formally adopted by the board of trustees in its annual goal-setting process. The formal adoption of that goal focused the institution on its achievement and established an institutional perspective of accreditation as an overriding priority. This perspective obviated any debate about whether the College would commit whatever resources were necessary to optimize its chances of succeeding.

The priority status of accreditation was reflected in a well documented strategy not only to educate the institution about the meaning of accreditation, but to emphasize its

importance to students, faculty and staff. The need to involve all college employees as partners in the quest for accreditation was also considered a pivotal factor in the success of the self-study process. The following activities and events proved successful in creating a college-wide sense of understanding, cooperation and commitment:

* NCA liaison visit and talk to HCC employees;
* Inclusion of a wide cross section of employees on the Steering Committee and Self-Study Teams;
* Monthly updates to the Board of Trustees;
* Deliberate series of meetings to prepare faculty/staff;
* Frequent updates of the self-study process to all employees through electronic and printed mail;
* Creation of a networked directory that allowed all employees access to self-study documents and drafts;
* Redirection of college standing committees to address key elements of the self-study process.

The creation of a campus climate conducive to the effort and hard work required to complete the self-study was essential to an effective self-study process. This climate was fostered by Heartland's institutional values which have shaped the culture of the College. These twelve organizational values provide the benchmark by which many of the institution's structures and processes are measured. Four of these value statements were particularly instrumental in the accreditation process in establishing the perspective of the institution and the desired attitude of employees and trustees with respect to the accreditation process.

One value, "We prize an upbeat, can-do attitude," informed the initial, "go-ahead" decision to seek initial accreditation. Given the newness of the College and the commitment required to prepare for initial accreditation, College leaders relied on this value statement to establish among everyone a positive approach to the arduous task ahead.

A second value, "All employees are partners in the success or failure of the

organization," continued the development of the proper perspective on the process. The value reminded employees that practically everyone would be called upon to contribute to the accreditation process; that there was an expectation that everyone would contribute; and that achieving or not achieving accreditation was an institutional responsibility, not simply the responsibility of those most directly involved in the process.

A third value, "Integrity is the most valued employee trait," began to deal with the individual employee's interaction with the site visit team. In various meetings employees were not only given an idea of what to expect when the team visited, they were also told simply to be straightforward in responding to questions from team members. They were not to misrepresent the institution in any way.

A fourth value, "Individually, collectively we can always improve," addressed the perspective that employees and trustees were encouraged to adopt regarding the site visit, the team report, and Commission action. The team was not to be regarded as a band of grand inquisitors nor the site visit as an inspection. It was to be welcomed as an opportunity for expert peers to review the College and to offer validation of positive development while also making valuable suggestions for improvement. The team report was to be viewed as an important document in the strategic planning of the institution, not simply a report card. And, finally, Commission action was to be as the culmination of a deliberate, multi-stage process of assessing the College, irrespective of the decision. An action not to accord accreditation was to be taken not as institutional failure and collapse, but as an indication that the College had simply not come far enough and needed further improvement, as our values suggested.

Having created a climate of institutional wide commitment to the self-study process, the arrival of the site team was awaited with a great sense of anticipation. Guided by the self-study coordinator, the College undertook a variety of preparations immediately prior to the visit. Such preparations included disseminating biographic information about the site team to College faculty and staff, publicizing the event to students, distributing personalized lunch invitations with the team to a random sample of students, and keeping in close contact with the site team chair to ensure that meetings were scheduled correctly and accommodation and transportation arrangements were satisfactory.

In May 1994, the site team recommended that Heartland Community College be granted the maximum five years of initial accreditation, with the next comprehensive evaluation scheduled for 1998-99. The Review Committee concurred with this recommendation in June 1994. At its August 1994 meeting, the Commission granted Heartland accreditation.

The self-study process was a profound learning experience for faculty, staff, students and the board of trustees. It represented a period of intense internal self-evaluation and institutional growth that was made possible through the dedicated partnership of the whole College community. The granting of accreditation was a major landmark in the development of this new and vibrant institution, and is a testimony to the dedication and hard work of all college constituents.